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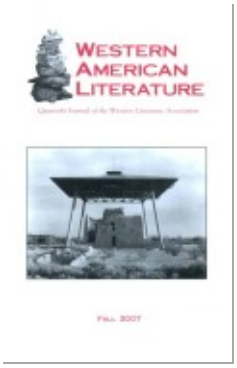

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Imagining Bigfoot

Gregory L. Morris

Despite his reputation for being fervently publicly shy, Bigfoot—in name and in image—is a pervasive and persistent presence in our popular culture. We see versions of the creature in advertisements for pizza, beef jerky, and beer. He shows up in episodes of *The Simpsons* and has given his name to an oversized golf club. He has figured in films such as *Harry and the Hendersons* (1987), where he is "adopted" by a middle-class American family, and *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (1972), a movie once sophisticatedly described by a student of mine as being "really crappy."

As the subject of written narrative, Bigfoot has found his way (as we will see later in the essay) into high-culture fiction and into literary nonfiction of the natural world, where he is the object of serious imaginative consideration. At the same time, a substantial number of Bigfoot narratives remain those most popularly and accessibly found in the slightly seedy world of the tabloids. We see them in our local supermarkets, racked up near the checkout line, tempting in their outlandishness. Over the last couple of years, I've tried to collect some of these stories, often discreetly (and shamefacedly) hiding my copy of the *Weekly World News* beneath my daily edition of the *New York Times*; I live in a small town where word travels quickly, and it wouldn't do to have this college professor spotted at the grocery store purchasing such a common, lurid rag as the *WWN*. But that is where the stories are, and so I must go there. Usually these Bigfoot tales are cover stories and make for wonderful examples of bad computer-manipulated photo art.

These stories are outrageous and incredible, designed to widen the gap between belief and disbelief. Three of these stories, not so randomly selected, should amply serve to illustrate the nature of this particular Bigfoot genre. A post-election issue of the *Weekly World News* (November 22, 2004) exclaimed on its cover "WORLD'S FIRST BIGFOOT HOOKER TELLS ALL!" and featured a "photo" of Bill Clinton and Ted Kennedy, in a limo, being propositioned by a shaggy-haired, mini-skirted Bigfoot prostitute. Clinton is giving us the thumbs-up. When we read the article, we learn that this particular female Bigfoot has managed (by learning sign language) to author a book—*The Hairy Hooker Does D.C.*—in which she names names and tells all. Says one Washington insider, "The Bigfoot's

Western American Literature 42.3 (Fall 2007): 277–92.

client list includes many staunch family values advocates. ... They know interspecies sex is wrong—but they find Helen irresistible" (8). Apparently, Helen was first spotted in Beasley, Canada, as reported in a July 19, 2004, issue. This is a decidedly urban, and even somewhat urbane, version of Bigfoot. The article itself contains a certain political and sexual edge, playing upon the mix of power and "interspecies sex" that attracts men to the "she-beast" (8, 9). In the same article, in a boxed item, we are also told that "experts say your chances of being kidnapped by a Bigfoot and forced to become its love slave are about 1 in 20 million—less than your chances of being struck by lightning" (8). This notion of Bigfoot as kidnapper will come up again in a different kind of narrative.

A second, end-of-the-year cover story (December 27, 2004) declared, "TWO-HEADED BIGFOOT SHOT BY IOWA COP." Naturally (or *un*naturally), the cover sports a dead, two-headed Bigfoot lying on its back in an Iowa cornfield, and a sunglassed state trooper, pistol drawn, taking aim. Inside, we discover that the two heads of this "exceptionally rare" type of Bigfoot ("Based on our calculations, there won't be another two-headed Bigfoot born for 900 years" [18]) possess diametrically opposed personalities: the head on the right, it seems, is the "good head" while the head on the left is the "bad head." This split personality has caused, understandably enough, problems for Bigfoot in the past, as a cryptozoologist explains: "In one incident, a female hiker claims she was set upon by the two-headed Bigfoot as she skinny-dipped. The more aggressive head drooled lustily and groped her breast with the left hand. But the right head intervened, scolding the other with monkey-like chattering and smacking the left hand away. As the two bickering heads growled at each other, she escaped" (19). The article poses rural Iowans—terrified by the "funny-looking" outsider who loots convenience stores of Twinkies, Ho Hos, and Sno Balls (a Bigfoot with a predilection for Hostess products)—against "eggheads" and animal rights activists who rail against the troopers as "a bunch of cowboys who've decided it's 'fun' to blow away Bigfoot" (19). Again, the story possesses a political and a sexual thrust even while it persists in being outrageous.

Finally, a third cover story (March 28, 2005) reveals yet another side of Bigfoot: "BIGFOOT SAVES BABY FROM FLAMING CAMPER." Here, Bigfoot is cast as the interloping hero, turning up in Bryce Canyon National Park among the hoodoos and camper vans. In this narrative, a young couple stand outside their blazing camper and watch helplessly as Sasquatch rushes silently into the inferno and rescues their six-month-old daughter from the flames. As silently as he appears, Bigfoot

Sabine Barcatta. *BIGFOOT CAMPER*. 2007. Photograph. 👣 Note that it's a very small camper, thus the lovable, juvenile Bigfoot creature adorning the vehicle.

disappears into the forest from which he sprang, his "back smoldering," the stench overpowering (28). The family sees a "human" aspect to this creature: the mother notes that Bigfoot's nose and eyes were "pretty small" and that he was "really tall, really strong, and his lips were kind of nice," while the father is even more precise in his recollection: "From what I saw, his lips looked warm and wide, like Julia Roberts'" (29). As part of this narrative convention, an outside "expert" is again drawn into the conversation—Dr. Reed L. Vincent of Mystic State University—to add a more "scientific" commentary on the event: "What happened in Utah is generally consistent with other reported activities involving children. The creature is usually pretty comfortable around mountain lion cubs, puppies and small humans—including friendly midgets. I have to admit, though, while this heroic behavior is not surprising, his willingness to interact even briefly with human adults is most uncharacteristic. Ordinarily, Bigfoot hurls rocks at adult intruders, like Donkey Kong" (29). This affection for children will also come into play later in this discussion, but for now we need only recognize the beneficent side of the creature and his heroic potential.

This tradition of Bigfoot trash fiction has been translated and transformed by writers of legitimate fiction, often adopting the tabloid convention to their imaginative needs, exploiting the structure and the tra-

dition to create something more profound than the source material from which they begin. One such writer is Ron Carlson, who, in his paired stories "Bigfoot Stole My Wife" and "I Am Bigfoot," takes advantage of the tabloid context to present a poignant, if sometimes comic, version of the Sasquatch experience. In these stories, Carlson creates two voices who narrate their own stories; both voices are distinct, intriguing, and, at times, pathetic.

The narrator of "Bigfoot Stole My Wife" is a thirty-something man who comes home to find his house empty, his wife and dog gone, and the air filled with the "smell of Bigfoot" (86). Rick is a guy who seems unclear about the state of his own condition. He spends his days at the track making ill-placed bets and ignoring his comely wife, Trudy. In an attempt to explain himself and his emptied home, Rick tells his story to a tabloid. As he says at the very beginning, "The problem is credibility" (85). No one is willing to believe Rick's story and his conviction that his wife has been stolen by Bigfoot: "A lot of people look at me and say, sure Rick, Bigfoot stole your wife. It makes me sad to see it, the look of disbelief in each person's eye" (85). Sadness permeates Rick's story, his voice, his life. Things are no longer the same for this man: "Bigfoot steals your wife and you're in for some changes" (86). Rick works hard to make us believe the unbelievable; he wants the narrative of his life to be credible. Belief, for Rick, is an absolute necessity:

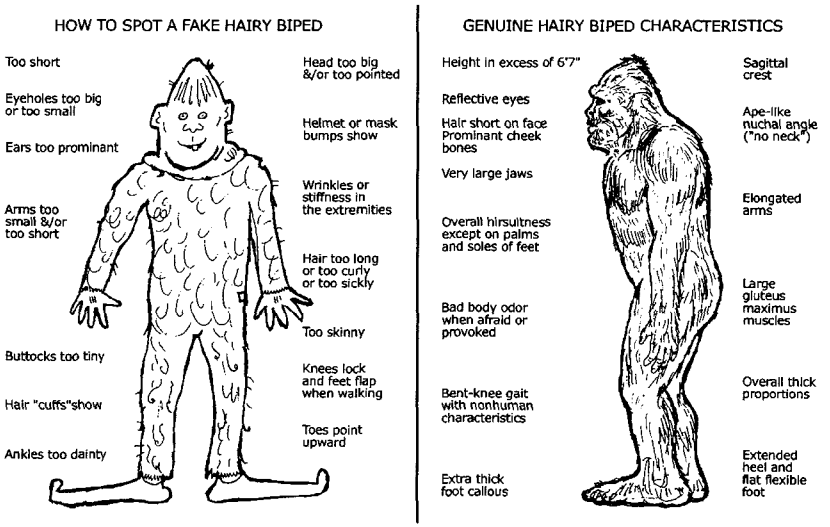
> I come home from the track to find the cupboard bare. Trudy is not home. The place smells funny: hairy. It's a fact and I know it as a fact: Bigfoot has been in my house.
>
> Bigfoot stole *my* wife.
>
> She's gone.
>
> Believe it.
>
> I gotta believe it. (90)

Bigfoot helps explain loss and silence and failure of the heart. Without Bigfoot, and without *belief* in Bigfoot, the dark truths of our lives become too ponderous to bear. Give them to Bigfoot, Rick says. Let our stories, believed or not, assume the beast's primitive authority.

That authority is just what Carlson offers in the companion short-short story, "I Am Bigfoot." Here the narrative voice belongs to Bigfoot himself. The beast has finally come out of the woods to tell his tale, to set the record straight, and to confirm Rick's unconfirmable story: "Well, first of all, I don't live in the woods *year round*, which is a popular misconception of my life-style. Sure, I like the woods, but I need action, too" (91–92). He is challenging and contradicting those very tabloid stories which have

sustained the legend of Bigfoot though he states he "is not interested in legal action" (91). He is declaring the facticity of Rick's experience and his narrative of that experience. In authorizing Rick's story, Bigfoot also authorizes his own story, turning fiction into nonfiction for those who will believe, making it "kind of a confession" (92):

> Why I came forward at this time concerns the truest thing I ever read about myself in the papers. The headline read "Bigfoot Stole My Wife," and it was right on the money. But beneath it was the real story: "Anguished Husband's Cry." Now I read the article, every word. Twice. It was poorly written, but it was all true. I stole the guy's wife. She wasn't the first and she wasn't the last. But when I went back and read that "anguished husband," it got me a little. I've been, as you probably have read, in all fifty states and eleven foreign countries. (I have never been to Tibet, in case you're wondering. That is some other guy, maybe the same one who was crossing that stream in northern California.) *And*, in each place I've been, there's a woman. Come on, who is surprised by that? I don't always steal them; in fact, I never *steal* them, but I do *call them away*, and they come with me. I know my powers and I use my powers. And when I call a woman, she comes. (92)


HOW TO SPOT A FAKE HAIRY BIPED
Too short
Eyeholes too big or too small
Ears too prominant
Arms too small &/or too short
Buttocks too tiny
Hair "cuffs"show
Ankles too dainty
Head too big &/or too pointed
Helmet or mask bumps show
Wrinkles or stiffness in the extremities
Hair too long or too curly or too sickly
Too skinny
Knees lock and feet flap when walking
Toes point upward
GENUINE HAIRY BIPED CHARACTERISTICS
Height in excess of 6'7"
Reflective eyes
Hair short on face Prominant cheek bones
Very large jaws
Overall hirsultness except on palms and soles of feet
Bad body odor when afraid or provoked
Bent-knee gait with nonhuman characteristics
Extra thick foot callous
Sagittal crest
Ape-like nuchal angle ("no neck")
Elongated arms
Large gluteus maximus muscles
Overall thick proportions
Extended heel and flat flexible foot

Michael Rugg. *HOW TO SPOT A FAKE HAIRY BIPED*. Ca. 1984. Pen and ink. 9" x 12". Courtesy of the artist and the Bigfoot Discovery Museum in Felton, California.

Bigfoot is interested in getting out the truth, the "real story," and in confirming Rick's side of the narrative. Bigfoot is the witness who comes forth, the source of the narrative and of its tradition: "I am Bigfoot. The Bigfoot" (91). But his story is also a "warning" to other men like Rick who have abandoned their partners to long silences, to emotional abandonment: "That's why I am here tonight. To tell you, fairly, man to man, I suppose, I am watching your wife, and I know for a fact that when I call, she'll come" (92, 93). Bigfoot is ineluctable masculine power: attractive, seductive, irresistible, originary. Things "get lovely" when Bigfoot calls (93).

In both of these stories, Carlson plays with the conventions of tabloid storytelling and with the modes of belief employed by readers of such popular, outrageous narratives. Both narrators address their readers directly, making their unmediated pitches for belief; they affirm the lives of the other; and they encourage us, warn us, to believe what they have to say. To disbelieve is just too damned risky.

This matter of belief is also the subject of Francine Prose's 1986 novel, *Bigfoot Dreams*, but Prose approaches the Bigfoot narrative from the other side of the fence. Rather than focusing on the subject of those narratives, Prose concerns herself with the author of those narratives. The novel's protagonist, Vera, is a writer for a New York City tabloid, *This Week*. What's more, she is responsible for creating that magazine's Bigfoot narratives; in the course of doing so, she has created a niche for herself as a writer and developed a kind of relationship with her subject:

> Vera has a special feeling for Bigfoot. At *This Week*, everyone wants to make the front page, and Vera's first front-page story was I MARRIED BIGFOOT. It told of an Oregon housewife, missing and long presumed dead, who reappeared claiming to have been kidnapped from her kitchen by Bigfoot, whose patient vegetarian ways—so different from her carnivore human hubby's—won her heart. Bigfoot taught her the secrets of the forest; she taught him the harmony line to "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Then gradually Bigfoot's passion cooled. He began spending more time away in the wilderness, until one night he went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came back. (14)

As Vera notes, this story "was a kind of landmark in Bigfoot literature, changing the focus, bringing Bigfoot home" (14). We can also see a connection to Carlson's stories of the kidnapped wife. Vera's self-conscious, tongue-in-cheek irony informs her vision of Bigfoot, even as she begins to imagine herself as part of one of her stories. Vera

has her own Bigfoot fantasy, one in which she and her friends, while camping, are befriended by Bigfoot. He takes them to his lair and "teaches them what he can. After a week they leave, more closely bound by their memory of those seven days than by love itself" (15). As she writes of Bigfoot, Vera complicates her own disbelief in the legend and the myth of the beast.

Bigfoot even comes to occupy Vera's dreamscapes, where she goes in search of the creature and whatever it is he might "teach" her: "This morning she's in a forest. Pine-needle floor, striped sunlight, a whooshing like wind in the trees. Something's hiding in the pines, but Vera's not scared. She knows that it's Bigfoot and that he's got something to give her" (114). Bigfoot is a benevolent and potential lover in Vera's dreams. She is without fear and welcomes the beast into her heart and into her imagination. She is comfortable with Bigfoot being in this part of her world.

So strong is Vera's sympathy for the creature and the story that she comes to write such stories "in her head" and to pattern her experience in terms of these stories (4).

> And suddenly she understands that the reason she thinks in Bigfoot stories is not that she writes for *This Week* but because on some level she wishes she *were* Bigfoot—huge and strong, self-sufficient, her dignity and privacy insured because no one's even sure she exists. If she were Bigfoot, she'd never have to see another flasher or screamer or ballet recital again. She'd steal cigarettes by the caseload till her lungs turned black and she died. Branches and leaves would cover her, keeping her secrets in death as in life, hiding what's left and what's already gone as flesh and bone and fur sifted quietly into dust. (139)

Being Bigfoot would allow Vera a means of escape from the world she inhabits and from all that plagues her in that world. To inhabit the Bigfoot narrative would be to exist in an alternate reality, one in which she could indulge her private vices and expire unnoticed into the underbrush of things.

It is a convenient wish. But when Vera comes up against the "reality" of this desire, she finds herself rattled to the roots by the experience. After attending a conference of cryptozoologists, Vera visits a good friend in Washington State. On a walk in the woods of the Pacific Northwest—far from the urban landscape of New York City and more in the world of her "Bigfoot dreams"—Vera suddenly locates herself: "And here she is, right smack in the heart of prime Bigfoot-sighting

territory! The thought gives her stepping-out-of-the-shower prickles all down her spine and makes her extremely anxious" (240). Desire begins to give way to anxiety. Alone in the woods, Vera—who has imagined variations on this Bigfoot experience in her own written narratives—now imagines an alternative narrative: "Suppose it is Bigfoot out there, and he isn't the friendly, cigarette-smoking primate of her dreams but a monster with the razor teeth and claws and disposition of a killer grizzly. Feet the size of bathtubs, paws the size of rakes" (246). Vera's new fear of Bigfoot enters the narrative equation as she strips her story down to its essence: "Because the truth, after all, is: Vera doesn't *want* to see Bigfoot. She's frightened half to death, embarrassed, too. There's not even a headline for this: FEAR OF BIGFOOT?" (247).

Vera's "encounter" with Bigfoot reminds her why she writes her stories. Those tabloid narratives are one version of the "truth"; they represent a possibility and an unavailability within the rational web of the world. We create our stories to describe experience or to describe the experience that might be. Dig deeply enough, dream expansively enough, and we find the desire to believe, just as Carlson's protagonist-husband *had* to believe and just as his protagonist-Bigfoot *demanded* we believe. Carlson and Prose use a kind of postmodern sensibility in their Bigfoot stories and encourage a form of ironic belief in them. For both writers, good reason exists for embracing the possibility of such a being as Bigfoot: he/she confirms our not-completely-lost connection with the primitive, the animal, the wild.

Most of us do desire, in one form or another, the wild. That desire may be inflected with varying degrees of eagerness, of reluctance, or of fear, but we persist in seeking some sort of connection with the "lost primitive" of our human natures. And we invent ways of making that connection—or we invent objects of desire that engage our imaginations in the creation of stories, stories which explain those objects and which make possible our belief in them. In other words, we transform wildness into myth, putting the wild at a safe yet accessible distance.

Perhaps the fullest, most intriguing, and most literarily serious imagining of the Bigfoot/Sasquatch life and story is to be found in the novel *Wild Life* (2000), wherein Molly Gloss explores a specific narrative of desire within a very specific historical place and time. Structurally complex, Gloss's novel consists in fact of several narratives, and of several narrative forms and elements. At the heart of *Wild Life* is the story of Charlotte Bridger Drummond, a single mother of five children living on the Columbia River frontier of southwestern Washington in the first

decade of the twentieth century. Gloss allows Drummond—a well-educated woman and a fiction writer and essayist—to tell her own fabulous story in the form of a journal. Interspersed throughout the journal are excerpts and fragments from Drummond's stories, essays, and novels. Gloss also includes newspaper and magazine articles ostensibly from the period, as well as a handful of discrete character portraits of selected characters, drawn by a separate, third-person voice. All of these elements enrich the historical texture of Drummond's story and make even more profound Gloss's imaginative effort. What is more, Gloss frames her novel with a letter (dated April 1999) from Drummond's granddaughter to a professor-friend who is also Drummond's biographer; the letter alerts us to the fact that Drummond's reputation as an American writer, while modest (she is not as well known, we are told, as "the other Charlotte" of her time, Charlotte Perkins Gilman), does have some currency and that she has been picked up by the academic worlds of literary and women's studies (18).

This latter device also drives home the point that Charlotte Bridger Drummond is a writer—and, more important, a *woman* writer. Gloss is particularly interested in the predicament of such a woman in her time and place. Familiar, familial pressures exert themselves on Drummond; she is a mother of five whose husband has disappeared (perhaps through accidental death, perhaps through intentional abandonment) and who sustains the family through her art. Drummond is very aware of what it means to be a writer: "To write, I have decided, is to be insane. ... [O]nce you start to write, you are moonstruck, out of your senses. ... You think and say incredible things" (19). Drummond is also acutely conscious of her status as a writer of popular fictions and dime novels, formulaic works conceived for mass market consumption (in this regard, she is not unlike Vera in *Bigfoot Dreams*); as such a writer, she is respectably successful and relatively at peace with herself. She knows what she does and where, aesthetically, she stands:

> Of course, I am not great myself—cannot take myself seriously as an Artist. I write Romance, certainly, full of action and a wild, fierce life—stories without much more than a glimpse of the shop or the town, stories in which there are frozen landscapes and fiery interiors, wild mountains, rivers whose sources have never been hunted out—but my writing is frankly "light" and does not try to be anything else: the lower forms of cloak-and-sword, without a glimpse of the Truth. (103)

She is also a fiercely independent woman, a free thinker and a *Free-thinker*, who exerts a feminist will in her life and her art (we learn, for example, that she has written erotica, though not for publication). Her protagonists are generally women of higher education and high spirit who pursue "wilderness adventures" in the mountain-forest landscapes of the American Northwest and who find themselves profoundly transformed by these encounters with wildness.

These stories, of course, are fictions. But in the course of her life, she is brought directly into the embrace of wildness and into a close consideration of her own innate wild-womanness. When the granddaughter of her housekeeper disappears in a back-country logging camp, having been brought there by her ne'er-do-well father, Drummond involves herself in the search for the girl. In doing so, she is also involved in an exploration of self and of the modes of belief we employ in understanding the incomprehensible. For this specific geography is a place not only of towering timber and shadowed forest and mountain crags; it is a place of myth, of story, of legend, and of legendary creatures. It is the home of "Tatoosh" and of "Skoocoom" and of "Sa-sa-katch." It is the home of giants. Drummond herself has deployed—with sympathy and a measure of belief—these native tales in her own fictions; but when she becomes disoriented in the

RobRoy Menzies. *ALBERT OASTMAN ABDUCTION*. 2003. Mixed media. 7.1" x 9.6". Courtesy of the artist.

wilderness in her search for the missing girl, she becomes her own "lost woman"—the subject of her own story.

Separated from her predominantly masculine world, she wanders into the world of the giants—wild woodland creatures who take the woman into their community and instruct her, so to speak, in the sociology of wildness. At first considered at a distance as "the Other," Drummond gradually is assumed into the weave of the giants' world; she becomes a member of what she conceives to be a family and sets about naming those creatures who have befriended her. For a time, she grows silent, loses her power of language to a natural state of muteness. Eventually, she gains access to the language of the "woods-beasts," adopts a transformed and transforming mode of perception, and comes to look at both the inner and outer landscapes from a new angle of vision. Her thinking, her consciousness—as well as her spirit and her heart—come to be informed by wildness, and in her journal she ponders the human relation to the wild:

> I wonder if we might more easily become like animals than animals become like humans. As a species, we human beings seem no longer fitted for life in the wilderness—have been weakened by centuries of civilized life—but there may yet be something inherent in our natures, some potentiality which wants only the right circumstances to return us to the raw edge of Wildness. Think of the Mountain Man of the early West, how quickly he o'erleaped those centuries of civilization and developed the necessary woodcraft, the physical and mental traits to live in his difficult surroundings. I feel this same potentiality in myself; feel I am daily learning to inhabit (body and mind) the wilderness in which I find myself. And as the Mountain Man was tutored and aided by the indigenous Indian, so I am led by the wild Mountain Giants. (206)

Drummond accommodates the wilderness spiritually, though only to a point; as she eventually notes, "I am wild, but not wild enough" (232). There are limits placed upon the human, and neither time nor circumstance cooperates with her foray into the wild. Nevertheless, "potentiality" is there, surviving and within reach of the suitably wild hand.

She is finally retrieved by her other world, brought back into the "unwild" while clinging still to her acquired wildness. Again, her perceptions of that world and of her place within it have been radically altered by her wilderness experience:

> Returning to live among men after living for a while among mountains, I am sensible of human beings as a Wild Child raised among wolves might be sensible of them: the nervousness of their faces, and the way their hands fidget, their fat-encumbered necks and the bleat of their voices. I have been a wildwoman for so long that I feel myself out of accord with this world, unable to like or understand much that I see. It takes such a very great effort for me to enter the consciousness of human creatures—to look at the world as they do, smell it the way they do—to understand their ways of thinking and feeling. I find I must exert a very great effort just to have them look at me and see something they recognize—a person like themselves. (228)

Nothing about her re-entry into her former world is simple. Her return to her human family is most problematic as her children must work hard to understand this altered woman who was and is their mother.

Clearly, Drummond is a changed woman, and change is one of Gloss's central concerns in this novel. She is altered by her attempts to *understand* these woods-creatures, these giants of the wilderness. She attempts to comprehend and to adopt something of their consciousness. Most important, perhaps, she acquires an experiential *belief* in this "wild, fierce life" (103). Her experience also alters her artistic, writerly vision. In the interleaved portions of *Wild Life*, Gloss gives us samplings of Drummond's pre-giant and post-giant writing, and it is here that we see and hear the ways in which she struggles to express somehow—within the limits of language and human imagination—the inexpressible qualities of wildness and wilderness. Transformed by this experience, she seeks a way to transform that experience into art and into story, not only for herself but for other women and women-readers. This effort is most clearly evinced in the excerpts taken from a collection of stories written by Drummond after her "captivity" and published in 1906 under the title *A Desolation, and Other Stories*. One of the stories, titled "Dark Things," imagines the life of the young girl lost in the woods and *to* the woods—who eludes discovery by the humans who search for her and who—in life and in death—becomes part of the wildness that envelops her. In a second story, "The Forks," she shapes her experience into narrative, telling of a woman who falls into the company of Wild Men and Wild Women and who manages to connect with their wildness, and feels "the dignified slow rolling of the earth beneath them all" (209). A third story, called "Tatoosh," is given in its entirety and actually closes Gloss's novel, providing the last word on this narrative of wildness. Drummond (like

Carlson) here allows the giants to tell their own story; the first-person voice is that of one of the wild ones. In this story, a "family" of wild things encounter a figure they come to call the Bearded Man, a former human who has "cut the cord between himself and the world and now stood separate in his victory, like an embryo which has triumphed over its womb" (254). The Bearded Man wreaks havoc upon the world of both human and animal, killing with indiscriminate violence. In time, he disappears—back into the "dark center of the mountain," according to the narrator—but leaves behind a "lost child" who is taken in by the wildpeople and made one of their family. "We have been keeping it safe," the narrator tells us, letting us know that the wildness goes on, that the giants live, that reason for belief still exists (255).

Sabine Barcatta. *SASQUATCH CONCRETE*. 2007. Photograph. Sign spotted in Logan, Utah. Note the sasquatch spelling of "project."

Ultimately, both Charlotte Bridger Drummond and Molly Gloss challenge all of us to reconfigure our readerly imaginations and to take seriously the transcendent powers of myth. *Wild Life* is, in fact, an undeniably *realistic* novel, despite the mythic content at the novel's heart and despite our seemingly innate need to disbelieve all that escapes our power to believe. Giants are a manifestation of possibility, and Gloss encourages us to shape these mythical beings into new and saving strategies.

These particular literary fictions dramatize and often coincide with ideas explored by writers of the natural world, writers who have been drawn to—and *into*—the Bigfoot universe. These writers have tended to conceptualize that universe in terms of consciousness and perception, potentiality and being, mythology and dream. They imagine Bigfoot/Sasquatch as a necessary, invigorating emblem of the wild.

For Robert Michael Pyle, Sasquatch is a creature perfectly accommodated to his environment—the "Dark Divide" in Washington's southern Cascade Mountains. That search, recounted in *Where Bigfoot Walks* (1995), is not *for* Sasquatch but *into* Sasquatch—in more than one sense. Pyle is interested in consciousness: in terms of the mind that is Bigfoot's and the ways in which that mind affects our imaginings of the beast.

Like Prose's Vera, Pyle also has his own "Bigfoot dreams" and creates an ever-expanding myth from those dreams. He attempts to imagine Sasquatch through fiction, but his imagination fails him and finds the essence of the woods-beast to be "ineffable" (121). And perhaps this is the problem of all who try to "capture" Bigfoot in language, as the beast eludes expression. But ineffability does not preclude possibility, and Pyle—like many others, including those writers considered above—insists upon the belief in such possibility: "Yet just there and then I was perfectly prepared to believe: not to believe *in* Bigfoot necessarily, but to believe that the world is wider than we normally wish to accept" (113–14). Just as Sasquatch is excellently adapted to his environment, so must we and our imaginations refashion our world to accommodate the fact of what might be and of what might be *out there*.

By using our imaginations in this way, Pyle says, we contribute to the ongoing and accumulating narrative that is myth. Bigfoot seems to exist conceptually in the intersection of history, myth, and belief, in a sort of liminal space, a perceptual "divide": "There was the murky border where history and myth meet and mingle. And always the boundary of belief" (113). Bigfoot inhabits dark spaces in our landscapes of consciousness, and we must illuminate those spaces, call out the beast, and recover the value inherent in its existence.

This question of value is extended by David Rains Wallace, who finds in Bigfoot a means of redefining our relationship with the world around us. Wallace, in *The Klamath Knot* (1983), sees Bigfoot as part of a separate structure of belief with which we are no longer familiar and which we no longer properly value. Embedded in that structure is a mythology born directly from wilderness, a subset or sub-narrative of a larger, older mythology of evolution.

Wallace is especially curious about the "giant stories" which proliferate in and out of wilderness areas. Such giants, Wallace argues, have a radical effect on the individual and cultural consciousness: "Civilized knowledge undergoes a kind of *petit mal*—an inconspicuous, indeed, unnoticed, lapse of consciousness—when faced with giants" (99). Giants also suggest the possession of a consciousness no longer available to us:

> We begin to see in them the possibility of a consciousness quite different from our own, of a being that may be very close to us in hominid origins, but that may have evolved in mysterious ways. We imagine an animal that somehow has understood the world more deeply than we have, and that thus inhabits it more comfortably and freely, while eluding our self-involved attempts to capture it. (137–38)

Wallace, like Gloss, *imagines* the forest giant in terms of differentiated consciousness, in terms of psychic and physical dimensions. Bigfoot demands, in fact, an act of imagination that surpasses belief and drifts into creation. Out of the chaos of both wilderness and consciousness emerges a reconfigured being: shaggy, large, disturbingly familiar. Bigfoot creates in us a nagging, generalized anxiety. When we imagine Bigfoot, though, we also imagine promise and potential. As Wallace reminds us, "We don't live in a world that's completely nailed down" (111). Room still exists for the outrageous, the mythic, the instructive:

> Giants might be seen as a kind of preadapted myth that can help us to survive the world we've created. Giants have hovered for thousands of years in the backgrounds of our dreams of immortality and omniscience, large shadows humans cast behind them as they moved toward brilliant visions of limitless power. But now the visions are fading into a natural world that has proved much deeper than we ever had imagined. Giants can have a new function in an evolutionary myth. They link us to lakes, rivers, forests, and meadows that are our home as well as theirs. They lure us into the wilderness ... not to devour us but to remind us where we are, on a living planet. If giants do not exist, to paraphrase Voltaire, it is necessary to invent them. (138)

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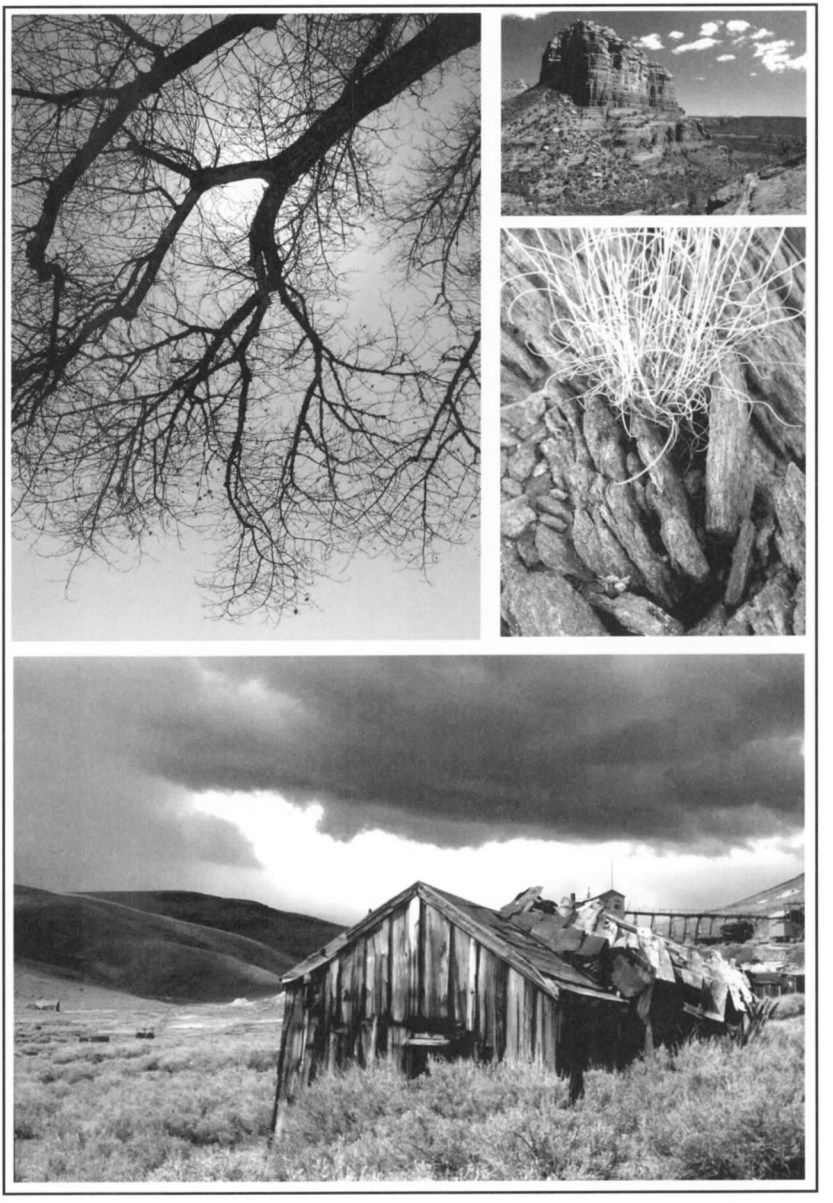
TWO NEW BOOKS AND A CONFERENCE CELEBRATING WALLACE STEGNER

With the approach of the centennial of Wallace Stegner's birth on February 19, 1909, two new books—*The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner*, edited by Stegner's son, Page, and *Wallace Stegner and the American West* by Philip L. Fradkin—are about to be published and a major conference held in northern California that will add new dimensions to his work and character.

The Stegner conference will take place in the small coastal town of Point Reyes Station, forty miles north of San Francisco, on March 7–9, 2008. Stegner's phrase "the geography of hope" provides the theme. The Point Reyes area, which borders a national seashore, is a leader in land-use preservation and the sustainable use of natural resources, causes that Stegner endorsed.

Besides Page Stegner, Fradkin, and former Poet Laureate Robert Hass, other panelists include the novelist Lynn Stegner, former Stegner Fellows James D. Houston and William Kittredge, and Barry Lopez, who knew Stegner. Stegner's agent Carl D. Brandt, *Los Angeles Times* book critic Jonathan Kirsch, and Melody Graulich of Utah State University will also participate.

Further details on the conference and registration information are available on the web site of Point Reyes Books at www.ptreyesbooks.com.



Bob McCrary. *MY LIFE'S SCENIC JOURNEY.* 2007. Photo collage. Courtesy of the artist.